

Move Benton County seat? YES: It's a 'slam-dunk' opportunity

By Doug Brown, In Focus

Most discussions about moving the Benton County seat from Prosser to Kennewick have been about money, so I will start there.

Opponents of the move have engaged in a campaign of disinformation for years, claiming costs up to \$35 million to move the county seat. Fred Staples, champion of the move, characterized these claims as "outrageous lies" and maintained it would cost virtually nothing

Staples' assessment was validated by the Financial Impact Statement (FIS), written by impartial economists and delivered at the end of August. If voters approve the move and we make only those changes required by law, i.e., move only two jobs and the commissioner meetings, it actually saves taxpayers money! The FIS did describe two other options that involve moving dozens of jobs to Kennewick, but clarified that those additional moves are optional.

All three commissioners oppose spending money to needlessly move county jobs from Prosser to Kennewick, which renders the more expensive alternatives irrelevant. Based on the economists' analysis, Benton County has the following opportunity: make a one-time investment of \$6,600 and enjoy cost reductions of \$15,804 each year forever. Savings come from paying for fewer trips between Kennewick and Prosser.

So how does one make an economic argument against this "slam-dunk" opportunity? By making things up! Millions would be wasted! Prosser's economy would be devastated by the loss of more than 100 county jobs! By repeating this nonsense often and loud enough, they hope to achieve victory-by-sound-bite. If enough people are asleep, it will work.

Now, what if we do not approve moving the county seat? Do we just return to the status quo? Not so fast -- millions of dollars really are at stake. In 2004, the chief justice of the Washington Supreme Court warned that Benton County is not in compliance with state law regarding Superior Court, which is conducted in the Justice Center in Kennewick. By state law, Superior Court is required to hold "regular sessions" at the county seat, which the court has not done in 30 years.

After the warning, the commissioners hired an architect to design expanded court facilities in Prosser, and the estimated cost (five years ago) was \$6 million to \$8 million. These plans were suspended pending the outcome of Staples' effort to move the county seat. If we now reject the move, we can expect major construction in Prosser to build courtrooms that are only needed for legal compliance. In addition, taxpayers will continually pay for a less efficient Superior Court system split between Kennewick and Prosser. Our Superior Court judges understand this and unanimously support moving the county seat.

Enough about money. The far larger issue, and one you never hear discussed in Prosser, is citizen access to the county's policy process, starting with commissioner meetings. By law, these meetings are held in the county seat. A historical perspective: When Prosser was named Benton County seat in 1905, the county population was about 7,900 and Prosser was the largest town in the county. Today, Benton County is home to more than 169,000 people, and 75 percent of them live in Kennewick, Richland or West Richland, while only 3 percent live in Prosser. Moreover, the growth rate at the east end of the county exceeds the county average, while Prosser's growth rate is substantially lower. The imbalance is growing and growing fast. Good government means citizen involvement. If we want this, should our policy meetings be held in our population center or at a

location which requires a 70-mile roundtrip in order to participate? The answer is obvious, especially when moving the county seat can reduce expenses. It is time to move.

-- Doug Brown is a consultant specializing in economic analysis and resource allocation.

Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2010/10/10/1205436/move-benton-county-seat-yes-its.html#ixzz12AUhieHn>